FIELDWORK ETHICS

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Too often we go to the field without a clear concept of what I consider to be the most salient feature of our fieldwork: our relationship to our informants and our discipline. Our research designs are as elegant as we can make them. We go armed with techniques and strategies engineered to elicit the most valid and replicable data; we are steeped in ethnomethodology, natural vs. induced context paradigms, and so forth. Yet few of us carefully and methodically consider the ethical parameters of our research. Three such ethical parameters are considered here: (1) What is the responsibility of the fieldworker to informants? (2) What is the responsibility of the fieldworker to the discipline of folklore? (3) How does the fieldworker's stance, both epistemologically and personally, affect the data gathered?[1]

Recently I lived and worked with the Mescalero Apaches on their reservation in southcentral New Mexico.[2] Unethical behavior on the part of a previous investigator working with the Mescalero Apaches resulted in the reservation being closed to all social scientific research for almost twenty years prior to my being allowed to work there. This previous situation undoubtedly colored my thoughts on ethics. However, the issues that emerged are relevant not only to work with American Indian populations and other third world groups but also to fieldwork in general.

In the past there has been a tacit assumption that fieldwork occurred in hermetically sealed communities. Not only did folklorists make this assumption but also it was to be found among those who used the materials of folklore as grist for their own mills--particularly anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and sociologists. We cannot be responsible for the behavior of others; but, at the same time, we must be aware that others have preceded us for good or bad. We do not work in a vacuum. Our fieldwork does not take place in isolation. Neither are we exotic anymore. It is rare to find people who have not seen tape recorders, cameras, pens and paper. While few, whether they are academics or lay people, have a concise concept of the scope and concerns of folklorists and folkloristics, all seem to understand our interest in the verbal arts. Unfortunately, their understanding of us and our interests is often faulty. The burden for untangling misconceptions lies with us as folklorists. We must let our potential friends and acquaintances (terms I find infinitely preferable to "informants") know what we are doing, as well as how and why it is to be done. We must be honest. This is especially true, I believe, with respect to American Indian groups given the history of poor relations due to broken promises. Collecting for the sake of collecting is poor science and worse public relations. Likewise, assuming our friends and acquaintances live hermetically sealed lives with no access to or familiarity with the results of our research is an untenable hypothesis.

Rather than continuing with vague abstractions, I'd like to share my thoughts and feelings concerning fieldwork with specific reference to the recent work I did at Mescalero. Since 1873 the Mescalero Apaches have had a reservation in southcentral New Mexico, but it has been only within the last two decades that they have exercised self-determination and control over their lives and well-being. Part of the exercise of this power had a direct bearing on me and my fieldwork.

Several informal agreements were made between Mr. Wendell Chino, the President of the Mescalero Apache Tribe whose authority includes being spokesman for the Tribe to outsiders, and myself. These agreements were a part of the negotiations that preceded my being allowed to go to Mescalero. Among the agreements were the following: my fieldnotes were to be open to the governing body of the Tribe, the Tribal Council; material, whether verbal or written, would be submitted prior to publication to the Council and they would retain veto power; any royalties that might accrue as the result of publication would be divided equally between the Tribe and me. The latter agreement has been moot to date. The first two agreements, however, plunge us into consideration of the three questions posed above.

In the first place, I was representing myself as an anthropologist and a folklorist. My graduate training provided the labels I used and I do, indeed, consider myself to be both. However, neither designation aids acceptance among American Indian groups today; on the contrary, acceptance is often denied such people. The Mescalero Apache people have hosted Harry Hoijer, Morris E. Opler, L. Bryce and Ruth Boyer, Harry Basehart, and Peter Kunstadter who did linguistic, anthropological, and folkloristic fieldwork at various times since the 1930s. Many Mescalero people made subtle distinctions among the three related disciplines. So by identifying myself as I did, I placed myself in a particular relationship to the Mescalero Apache people in general. This stance had both positive and negative aspects.

People who work within the tradition of the three disciplines take notes and then leave to publish articles and books. It was amazing to me to learn the numbers of Mescaleros who had read scholarly publications concerning themselves. Therefore, many people were reluctant to talk to me at first; many did not wish to be the subject of my inquiries. The project that brought me to Mescalero was one that involved children primarily. But working with children also meant working with parents. To have identified myself as a teacher, which I have been and will be again, might have simplified initial acceptance. Yet it would also have not been true, since I was there to try to develop a means for teachers to communicate more effectively with minority group children. I was not there as a classroom teacher. I did take notes openly, as well as pictures. And I made tape recordings, again openly. Over and over again I was asked what my book would be about.

There was a misconception common about the book. Part of my initial agreement had been that I would write graded reading materials for the children in the reservation elementary school. There were to be stories of Apachean history,

first person narratives, and stories culled from older, published documents. These stories were to be written so that there would be a tangible and immediate result of my having been at Mescalero. However, until the first "book" (actually a booklet of eight pages) appeared, most people assumed I was writing a magnum opus and only telling them a story about writing for their children. While I had been truthful about my purpose, people could only judge me by their prior experiences or those of relatives which were passed to them in stories, and concerned social scientists who came to the reservation, took notes, disappeared, and in their wakes appeared books and articles over which the people felt they had no control and which they often felt were inaccurate. Immediately after the appearance of the first booklet, I found my task immeasurably easier: people began to come to me with data rather than my having to seek them out and request information.

The problem of inaccuracy is a serious one. We operate on at least two levels of "truth": one emic and the other etic. What is true and correct according to Mescalero world view is often not the issue on an analytic level. The fit between the two levels is a difficult one at times. Yet the problem is not an insurmountable one. When people work together there develops a sense of mutual understanding and trust; that's a simplistic statement. However simple it may be, it forms the basis on which to build a paper or other publication that satisfies both the people who form the basis for the statements and the author making those statements. There must first be honesty on the part of the fieldworker in order for the process to begin.

Yet that very honesty precludes the gathering of some data. People often expressed the idea that I was there to steal stories. Community-recognized sources of information quite frequently refused to talk to me. At times I represented all the years of broken treaties, half truths, and outright lies American Indians have received in the last few hundred years. It is an uncomfortable position in which to be placed. But for people who have been ruled by others, the control over outsiders is as much an emotional issue as a pragmatic one. My very presence on the reservation was an irritant to a few people. Their only recourse, since I'd been through the Council, was to refuse me the information I needed. Perhaps additional information could have been gathered had I not been honest about my purpose in being there; but I doubt it.

We must also recognize that there are factors over which we have no control that seriously influence our effectiveness as fieldworkers. Being a woman and a mother were definite pluses; my age was also in my favor. The Mescalero Apache people are very family-oriented. As the literature states, families are matri-centered in that the mother's line is the more heavily weighted--Mescalero people in general have a tendency to feel closer to those to whom they are related through their mothers. And, as with much of the contemporary American population, marriages are not stable; there are Mescalero women who are divorced and raising children just as there are WASP women in the same position My status as a divorced woman with a daughter was not an unusual one. Finally, I had lived long enough to be expected to have acquired some sense; the Mescalero are not a youth-worshipping people as is the majority of mainstream Amer-

ica. Some kinds of information came to me much more easily because I did not fit a culturally accepted position and because I had lived long enough to "know" things. Personal factors are perhaps the most difficult to assess accurately before going to the field. Often personal matters are as important as epistemological ones when data collection is the issue.

Once the data are collected the problems have just begun. I had agreed that my fieldnotes would be open to the Council. This agreement raised several problems clustering around my responsibilities to those whom I talked with and to those who will follow me whether in actuality or through publications. Do you, as a fieldworker, see all and tell all? Do you see all and tell all but keep identities secret? Do you see all and tell a little? Do you write down all you see? On the one hand there is the responsibility to maintain the flow of scholarly information. My job would have been infinitely more difficult had it not been for the fine work, and excellent publications, of Hoijer and Opler. What, if anything, do I owe to scholars who will follow me? On the other hand are the responsibilities I have to my friends who shared portions of their lives with me. I cannot break confidences no matter how interesting the information.

Yet that does not solve the problem. The Mescalero Apaches are a small group of people. By having my fieldnotes open to the Council members I probably eliminated several potentially fascinating friends due to internal political configurations of the Tribe Anyone who talked to me could probably be identified in my notes by other Mescalero people; indeed, people often told me that so-and-so was the one that Dr. _____ had spoken to. In point of fact, there were very few occasions when members of the Council asked to see my notes. But the very fact that those notes were available to them made some people reluctant to speak to me and this fact kept me from recording information I might otherwise have included in my notes. No matter how carefully thought-out the research design, once you live with a group of people, you gather information irrelevant to your central concern. How such information is handled is an open ethical question.

During a recent scholarly meeting I was called to task by an Indian woman who is also an anthropologist. She was concerned because I had said I didn't record all I saw. It was her contention that the very people with whom I was living and working might someday need the data and be able to find it only in anthropological records. There has indeed been a good deal of research done by Indian people into scholarly publications during recent cultural revitalization movements. Her position is certainly one that deserves consideration. However, given the view of history that most Mescalero Apaches share, I believe it would have been unethical of me to have recorded some aspects of life. The Mescalero Apache people believe, in general, that if something is meant to be remembered and perpetuated, it will be; if not, it will disappear. There is a great amount of reluctance to record "history" or verbal art just to preserve it. Despite my personal beliefs to the contrary, is it ethical for me to preserve what they prefer that I do not record? I do not think so.

I have heard a respected social scientist say the data are the thing--to hell with people. I, obviously, cannot agree with such a position. To my way of thinking such a position is a flagrantly unethical one. But I am also willing to admit that the ethics involved in fieldwork are often situational ones. What worked for me with the Mescalero Apaches may not be the solution for working with another group. I may not reach the same conclusions as regards data in the future as I've made in the past. However, I do believe that before anyone goes to the field, especially when the field situation is with American Indians, time should be devoted to a consideration of the three questions with which I began this paper.

More basically, going to work with American Indians under false pretenses, as to the scope of the research to be undertaken or as to your own identification, is a statement of lack of confidence in the relevance of your research and even less confidence in yourself as a scholar. It is yet another betrayal in that such an attitude denies treatment of informants as equals.

In our discipline we gather data from people. We spend a good portion of our graduate school apprenticeship becoming conversant with methodologies and strategies designed to produce lore from the folk, however we define "folk." We must also spend a portion of that apprenticeship in consideration of ethical questions. I've suggested three such questions; there are a myriad of others. Attention paid to questions of an ethical nature before going to the field greatly enhances the possibility of a successful and pleasant field experience for all concerned.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Folklore Society meeting in New Orleans, 25 October 1975. Its title at that time was "'Not if you want to stay on this reservation, you don't!'--Ethics and Ethnics."

2. My field stay (9/74-9/75) was supported by the Whitney M. Young, Jr. Memorial Foundation with whom I was a 74-75 fellow. Additional non-monetary support was provided by the Mescalero Apache Tribe through the Tribal Council. Sincere and grateful acknowledgement is tendered to both institutions.